Student Experiences with, and Attitudes about, Diversity

National trends, local realities

Beloit College
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The Center of Inquiry

• Strengthen liberal arts education for all students
  – Liberal arts education is any form of education that promotes broad outcomes such as critical thinking, curiosity, moral reasoning, leadership, political engagement

• Work with faculty, staff, and students at colleges and universities to review, make sense of, and respond to evidence

• Not affiliated with state or federal government or accreditors

• Not-for-profit
Today’s conversation

• Guided by research from the Wabash Study
  – The Wabash Study IS NOT the cat’s meow of research on diversity
  – The study created an opportunity for us to learn about a set of colleges and universities, and how they work to improve student learning

• Questions
  – What promotes changes in attitudes about diversity?
  – What are some of the academic benefits of diversity experiences?
  – What’s the academic impact of negative experiences with diversity?
  – What keeps liberal arts colleges from doing better with diversity (and other things)?
Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education

- 49 institutions
- 17,000 students
- Longitudinal
- Surveys and interviews

Purpose
- Identify practices and conditions that promote liberal arts education
- Collaborate with faculty, staff, students, and administrators at institutions to use evidence for improvement
What did we measure?

- Orientation toward interacting with diverse people
- Openness to engaging new ideas and diverse people
- Academic motivation
- Attitude toward reading and writing
- Critical thinking
- Interest in contributing to the arts
- Interest in contributing to the sciences
- Interest in engaging intellectually challenging work
- Interest in political and social involvement
- Moral reasoning
- Socially responsible leadership
- Well being
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Diversity measures

• Orientation toward interacting with diverse people
  – Getting to know someone of another race is generally an uncomfortable experience for me
  – In getting to know someone, I like knowing both how he/she differs from me and is similar to me
  – It’s really hard for me to feel close to a person from another race
  – Knowing how a person differs from me greatly enhances our friendship

• Openness to engaging new ideas and diverse people
  – I enjoy taking courses that challenge my beliefs and values
  – Learning about people from different cultures is a very important part of my college education
  – The courses I enjoy most are those that make me think about things from a different perspective
  – I enjoy having discussions with people whose ideas and values are different from my own
What promotes growth on these measures of diversity?
Interactional Diversity Experiences
Interactional Diversity

- During the school year, how often have you:
  - had serious discussions with student affairs staff (e.g., residence hall staff, career counselor, student union or campus activities staff) whose political, social, or religious opinions were different from your own?
  - had serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own?
  - had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values?
  - attended a debate or lecture on a current political/social issue?
  - participated in a racial or cultural awareness workshop?

- To what extent does your institution emphasize encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds?

- While attending this college, how often have you:
  - had discussions regarding inter-group relations with diverse students (e.g., students differing from you in race, national origin, values, religion, political views)?
  - had meaningful and honest discussions with diverse students about issues related to social justice?
  - shared personal feelings and problems with diverse students?
What are the other academic benefits of interactional diversity experiences?
Interactional Diversity promotes growth on

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- Well being
What else promotes growth on our measures of diversity?
Other good practices that promote growth

- Good Teaching and High-Quality Interactions with Faculty
  - Faculty/staff interest in teaching and student development
  - Out-of-class student/staff & student/faculty interactions
  - Organization, preparation, clarity, prompt feedback

- Academic Challenge and High Expectations
  - Hard work, challenging assignments and interactions
  - Synthesis, judgment, integration, and reflection
It’s not about the good practices themselves

It’s about having caring, committed adults, and being in a supportive environment
But what happens if there are uncaring or unwelcoming elements in the community?
Negative Experiences with Diversity

• While attending this college, how often have you:
  – had guarded, cautious interactions with diverse students?
  – felt silenced by prejudice and discrimination from sharing personal experiences with diverse students?
  – had hurtful, unresolved interactions with diverse students?
  – had tense, somewhat hostile interactions with diverse students?
  – felt insulted or threatened based on race, national origin, values, or religion with diverse students?
What’s the educational impact of these negative diversity experiences?
Negative experiences “promote” declines in

- Orientation toward interacting with diverse people
- Openness to engaging new ideas and diverse people
- Academic motivation
- Attitude toward reading and writing
- Critical thinking
- Interest in contributing to the arts
- Interest in contributing to the sciences
- Interest in engaging intellectually challenging work
- Interest in political and social involvement
- Moral reasoning
- Socially responsible leadership
- Well being
Students who have more positive experiences with diversity are more likely to have negative experiences with diversity.
Do positive experiences with diversity ameliorate negative experiences with diversity?

Sometimes
Interaction of positive and negative diversity

• Interest in engaging intellectually challenging work
  – High levels of positive diversity interactions overcome the impact of negative interactions

• Critical thinking
  – High levels of negative diversity interactions negatively impact critical thinking regardless of the level of positive diversity interactions

• We don’t know for the other outcomes
What holds liberal arts colleges back

• Low levels of positive diversity experiences
  – “…college diversity interactions are only associated with educational benefits when these experiences occur frequently.”
  – Impact of diversity experiences is curvilinear

• Challenge of implementing good practices from national research in local contexts

• Individualism and the lack of common educational force
Frequency of good practices in the 4th year

- Good Teaching: Benchmark score
- Academic Challenge: Benchmark score
- Interactional Diversity: Benchmark score
Frequency of good practices in the 4th year

- Good Teaching: Often
- Academic Challenge: Sometimes
- Interactional Diversity: Benchmark score

Benchmark score

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90

Center of Inquiry
Teagle Assessment Scholars
HEDS Consortium
What holds liberal arts colleges back

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• Individualism and the lack of aligned educational impact